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Are You Ready to Plan Your Summer Menu

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This season is an exciting time of year for everyone as we take a break from snow and welcome summer. The change in climate also means that some of our favorite fruits and vegetables are back in season!

This might not mean a lot to some people, because with our vast transportation system our favorite fruits and vegetables can be found in our neighborhood supermarket year round. However, for those wanting to eat healthy but cringe at the grocery bill will realize that shopping in season will save you money.

We are all flooded with nutrition information from many sources; but applying this information can be a bit challenging. Incorporating healthy nutrition tips doesn't have to be hard, and it all starts in the kitchen. When it comes to meal planning it is best to keep the plate in mind!

A healthy diet starts with eating more fruits and vegetables, keeping half your plate vegetables, a fourth of the plate whole grains, and a fourth lean protein foods. That's easy! Secondly, think seasonal and possibly local.

Vegetables and fruits that are in season are significantly cheaper, doing this lets you adopt those healthy habits you are trying so hard to incorporate without busting your budget. Plan your menu around seasonal produce, think

Roasted Feta Portabello Mushrooms with Asparagus

Servings: 2 Prep time: 10 mins Cook time: 15 mins

- 2 portabello mushrooms
- 1 cup of raw spinach
- ½ cup of feta cheese
- 1 medium tomato
- 2 garlic cloves
- 2 sprigs of rosemary
- 2 tablespoons of truffle olive oil or extra virgin olive oil.
- 10 stalks of asparagus

Directions:

- 1) Preheat oven to 375 F
- 2) Dice tomato and 1 minced garlic clove, combine with feta cheese and set aside.
- 3) Cut out mushroom stems and line each with the spinach leaves. Place mushrooms on a baking sheet.
- 4) Divide the tomato, feta and garlic mixture evenly and spoon on to the spinach leaves.
- 5) Top each mushroom with a rosemary spring and drizzle ½ tablespoon of oil on to each.
- 6) Break off the ends of the asparagus and lay on baking sheet with mushrooms. Top with 1 minced garlic clove and drizzle 1 table spoon of oil on top. Season with black pepper as desired.
- 7) Bake mushrooms and asparagus for 15 minutes or until cheese is melted.
- 8) Serve with a side salad or 1 cup of brown rice, quinoa, or another whole grain of choice.

about which vegetables are on sale or at a reduced price at the store or farmers market then determine what type of protein food you will pair with it, and always include some whole grains.

Protein foods are the most expensive items on your shopping list so you can save money by purchasing seasonal foods, keeping staples such as whole grains stocked in your pantry, and reduce your protein intake to about 3 ounces (about the size of a deck of cards) per meal. Instead of eating a whole chicken breast, which ranges from 6 to 8 ounces, half it and save the other piece for lunch or your next dinner. Following this tip saves you money and helps you to apply the plate methods.

The most common complaint I hear: "healthy food just doesn't taste as good!" That is typically because "healthy food" does not have the added fat and salt that many people are used to tasting.

Added saturated fat, which is found in butter, dairy, red meats, and other processed items, takes a toll on our heart health. Over time, saturated fat over consumption leads to elevated cholesterol levels and increases our risk of developing heart disease.

Excessive sodium intake can result in elevated blood pressure, which is what many health professionals term as the "silent killer" because we usually don't feel it!

Homemade Salad Dressing
3 cups of fresh basil
1 cup of olive oil
¼ cup of red wine vinaigrette
2 cloves of garlic minced
1 shallot
Pinch of salt and black pepper

Combine ingredients in blender and blend until smooth.

Substitute basil for cilantro and add lime juice instead of red wine vinaigrette and throw in some red pepper flakes or a jalapeno for a spicy southwestern dressing.

Good news though. Healthy food can taste good, even when we work salt and saturated fat out of our diet. The trick is to add robust flavor with healthy fats, such as extra virgin olive oil, and fresh herbs and spices.

All of those items are aromatic and add a lot of complexity to dishes. Plant based cooking oils; think nut oils, olive oil, and canola oil; are rich in omega-3 fatty acids which help decrease inflammation in our body and improve our cholesterol levels.

Herbs and spices are rich in antioxidants, which also have anti-inflammation properties! If a recipe calls for multiple herbs and spices use the 2-3 rule, trying to use at least 2 fresh herbs to 1 dried herb.

If you are looking for a spring/summer family activity, start an herb garden. Herbs are very easy to grow in pots and will produce through the entire summer up until the first frost of fall. You spend a small amount on gardening supplies and have fresh herbs to cook with for the next two seasons!

When it comes to planning a healthy

menu, there is one important thing to ask: Is this realistic? There is nothing more disappointing than seeing fruits and vegetables spoil in your kitchen.

To help reduce food waste, think realistically how many meals you can cook at home, and be honest about how often you plan on eating out for convenience.

If you or your family are not "leftovers people" think about how many servings are in the recipes you plan on cooking and adjust them so there is the right amount of servings. This way you do not end up with more than what you are actually willing to eat.

Starting a healthy summer menu does not have to be complicated and costly. Making some small adjustments in what items you shop for, your portion sizes, and how you plan your week can save time and money.

Most importantly, you can eat the way you want without having to rob a bank! Consider seeing a registered dietitian to help you customize your diet to suit your goals, and attending one of the nutrition classes offered throughout the month!

To schedule an appointment with a dietitian AT Evans Army Community Hospital, call 526-7920.